An Interview with COLIN L. POWELL

The White House

The President, Secretary, and Chairman on February 11, 1991.

THE CHAIRMAN as Principal Military Adviser

JFQ *What is your appraisal of the overall impact of the Goldwater-Nichols Act?*

POWELL I believe the implementation of the Goldwater-Nichols Act has satisfied the intent of its author—Congress—which under article I, section 8 of the Constitution has the power to make regulations for the Armed Forces.

Congress wanted to make sure that the Joint Chiefs of Staff were providing the President, Secretary of Defense, and other members of the National Security Council with good, clear, crisp, comprehensive military advice and recommendations. And they wanted to change a system whereby a committee—the Joint Chiefs—tended, they felt, to offer the least common denominator advice. Congress achieved this by making the Chairman the principal military adviser—charged to furnish direct military advice—but did not remove the responsibility of the other chiefs to provide it as well. During my tenure as Chairman, I gave my civilian

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Moscow Summit, May 1988.

The White House

as national security adviser I watched the Cold War starting to end

leaders my own professional advice, fully informed by the advice and counsel I received from my JCS colleagues. When one or more of the chiefs disagreed, I made sure the Secretary and the President were aware of any differences. This is what Congress intended.

Goldwater-Nichols also clarified the lines of command and communication between the President and Secretary and the combatant commanders. CINCs are subordinate to the Secretary—he is their boss, not the Chairman or the Joint Chiefs. The act authorized the Secretary to use the Chairman as his channel of communications to the combatant commanders.

The act was also intended to improve the professionalism of the officer corps in conducting joint operations. It has certainly done that. The Joint Staff has been improved so dramatically that it is now, in my judgment, the premier military staff in the world. You can see a similar effect in the staffs of the combatant commanders. Just as important, jointness, or teamwork as I prefer to call it, has become imbedded in the culture of the Armed Forces.

JFQ *How has the Chairman's more influential role affected the balance of civilian and military authority?*

POWELL You have to remember that Goldwater-Nichols was intended to strengthen civilian control over the military by clarifying and reaffirming the role of the Secretary and his relationship with the Joint Chiefs and combatant commanders.

But to answer the question fully, you have to look beyond the legislation. The key is the relationship between the Secretary and the chiefs, especially the Chairman. The Secretary is free to obtain advice from whomever he chooses, to include his own civilian policy staff. He is obliged to receive the advice of his military leaders; but he does not have to accept it if he finds he can get better advice elsewhere or if he doesn't find it responsive to his needs.

My experience with Secretary Dick Cheney for almost four years was that he fully understood his authority over the entire Department of Defense. He used me and the chiefs skillfully to get the military advice he needed. He also skillfully used his policy staff to get it from another perspective. He was then able to blend the two perspectives. I made sure that Secretary Cheney saw the Joint Staff as his staff as well as mine.

The frequent claim that the Secretary's civilian authority and influence were reduced by Goldwater-Nichols is simply nonsense. Mr. Cheney demonstrated on more than one occasion that he was up to the task of controlling the military. Obviously, he found the advice we provided useful and relevant. To

The White House Situation Room.

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suggest that somehow the Secretary is at the mercy of the Chairman and the other chiefs is wrong. The suggestion does a disservice not to the Chairman or the other chiefs but to the Secretary. The Secretary was very much in charge. And because he usually found the military advice he received useful and acted upon it, I believe the Joint Chiefs of Staff became a more influential body than it had been. To improve, to the Secretary's satisfaction, the quality of the military advice he received was what Goldwater-Nichols was all about.

The proof of the pudding is the string of successful military operations we have seen in recent years, from Panama through Desert Storm through Bosnia. The problems encountered in Grenada or Desert One, which gave such impetus to Congress to reform the process, have been largely overcome. We are not perfect, but the performance of the Armed Forces in joint operations has improved significantly and Goldwater-Nichols deserves a great deal of the credit.

JFQ *Why has this new role of the Chairman drawn such fire from critics?*

POWELL Some critics suggest that the Chairmen, especially me, did something wrong in implementing the act in the manner intended by Congress. I tried to take the act to its fullest limit. If I understand my obligation, I was supposed to faithfully discharge the law.

Many critics didn't like the law in the first place. They fought it before it was passed and are still fighting it. These critics sometimes forget that Congress enacted Goldwater-Nichols because they were deeply dissatisfied with the system of old that the critics long for. I am sure there was frustration among service staffs because the Chairman could move forward on his own. The opportunities for logrolling and frustrating progress for parochial interests were severely curtailed. We no longer had to "vote" on issues to determine what advice the chiefs were going to provide to the Secretary.

Interestingly, the chiefs seemed to have less of a problem with the role of the Chairman than their staffs and the critics. In my four years as Chairman, I worked with five different sets of chiefs. I believe they felt they were fully included in the formulation of advice. In fact the Chairman relieved them of a lot of housekeeping issues and permitted them to spend more time and energy on organizing, equipping, and training their forces, which is their principal role.

Congress and the American people have had ample opportunity over the past ten years to see how the Armed Forces are working and they are pleased. Goldwater-Nichols has been a success notwithstanding its critics.

JFQ *What is the nature of the relationship between the Secretary of Defense and Chairman under Goldwater-Nichols?*

POWELL The Chairman was given no authority under the act. He was given a role—to serve as the principal military adviser. He commands nothing. What the Chairman ultimately possesses is influence, not authority,

and only that influence which the Secretary gives him. It cannot be taken from the Secretary—he must give it to the Chairman. The Secretary does that when he believes the Chairman is someone who can get the best military advice available out of the system, someone in whom he has confidence and trust. That's ultimately what makes the whole system work. It is a system designed by Goldwater-Nichols but one executed by human beings who have confidence in each other.

And at the top of that DOD pyramid is the Secretary of Defense. There's no doubt in my mind—at least in the case of the two Secretaries I worked for, Dick Cheney and Les Aspin—that they were in charge.

JFQ *How did your experiences in senior positions in Washington help you as the first officer to serve his entire tour as Chairman under Goldwater-Nichols?*

POWELL I came to the job with a rather unique background. I had been national security adviser, deputy national security adviser, and military assistant to three deputy secretaries and one Secretary of Defense, which gave me a window on the workings of the entire Joint Staff and the Chairman's relationship to the Secretary prior to the enactment of Goldwater-Nichols. As national security adviser I also watched the Cold War starting to end. I had also commanded all operational Army forces in the United States and knew what was happening in the field. As CINC, Forces Command, I was a force provider to the overseas combatant commands. That gave me great insight into their regional warfighting plans and needs.

That experience was also enhanced by the fact that I had both personal and professional relationships with the senior members of President Bush's national security team. I was national security adviser when he was Vice President and I lived next door to him for two years in the Reagan White House. During that same period Congressman Dick Cheney was the minority whip and Jim Baker was Secretary of Treasury. So these established relationships gave me the entree that I needed to fully implement Goldwater-Nichols.

JFQ *Why under your leadership did the Joint Chiefs often meet informally?*

POWELL When former Chairman General Dave Jones and Army Chief of Staff General Shy Meyer began the debate that eventually led to Goldwater-Nichols, one of Shy Meyer's ideas was to have two groups of four stars—the service chiefs and another council of four stars detached from their service responsibilities—to serve as the real Joint Chiefs. I didn't think that was the way to go. But the idea had merit because it is hard for any service chief who has to fight for his service's interest to put that interest aside easily in discharging his role as a member of the Joint Chiefs. This is particularly the case in well-attended formal meetings where the chiefs arrive with formal service-prepared positions to defend and with their institutions watching.

So I used a combination of formal and informal meetings. We had lots of formal "tank" meetings as a group and often with the Secretary of Defense in attendance. But to use Shy Meyer's idea, I had many, many more informal meetings, just the six of us sitting around a table in my office without aides, staff, or notetakers. This was not great for history, but it was a superb way of getting the unvarnished, gloves-off, no-holds-barred personal views of the chiefs. They never shrank from defending their service views, but it was easier for them to get beyond those views when we were no longer a spectator sport. It was also easier to protect the privacy of our deliberations. We occasionally had a donnybrook but almost always came to agreement on the advice that I took forward to the Secretary. On occasion, the Secretary would join us at the little round table in my office. I am sure the service staffs were often unhappy because they didn't have their chiefs loaded with positions and wouldn't always get a complete readout.

It was a technique I found useful. Other Chairmen might choose to do it differently. I wouldn't be surprised if we met more times formally and informally than any previous sets of chiefs. I knew my approach was controversial and kept waiting to see if I had to adjust it. But I never had a single chief say, "We need to hold more formal meetings."

I might add that the secure direct hotline telephone and intercom systems we installed among the chiefs and with the combatant commanders permitted an even more informal means of consulting. We were constantly in touch and generally spoke with one voice once agreement was reached on a given issue.

JFQ *What impact did the Goldwater-Nichols Act have on the conduct of military operations?*

POWELL The invasion and liberation of Panama in December 1989 was the first full test of Goldwater-Nichols in a combat situation, although there was a partial test under Admiral Crowe during operations against the Iranian navy in the Persian Gulf in 1988. You might even say that Panama was something of a shakedown cruise for what we would be doing in Desert Shield and Desert Storm a year later.

General Max Thurman, CINCSOUTH, and one of the greatest soldiers I've ever known, created a joint task force to design the contingency plan. The plan was reviewed in Washington but not second-guessed by the Joint Staff and Joint Chiefs. It had been briefed to the Secretary. When soldiers of the Panamanian Defense Force killed an American Marine officer, we were ready and able to move quickly. I assembled the chiefs, we reviewed the situation and plan, and provided our recommendation to intervene. Dick Cheney agreed and we made that recommendation to the President after thoroughly briefing him on the plan. On the night of the operation and in the days that followed, General Thurman was given maximum flexibility to use the forces we provided him. He reported directly to the Secretary through me. Secretary Cheney knew every aspect of the plan intimately but did not insert himself into every tactical decision. I dealt with Thurman, and the Secretary watched and listened and kept the President fully informed. When we

jointness means nothing more than teamwork

Remnants of retreating Iraqi forces.

DOD

needed additional political guidance, the Secretary rapidly got it from the President. There were glitches, of course. There always are. But the model was set: we had clear political guidance, there was a solid and well-integrated plan, the CINC was in charge, and there was appropriate oversight from the Joint Chiefs and National Command Authorities. It was the model we used, scaled-up, for Desert Shield and Desert Storm and it is the model that is still in use and working very well.

JFQ *How would you assess the level of jointness during Desert Storm?*

POWELL I would assess it as excellent. It wasn't perfect. We identified improvements we had to make such as enhancing the integration of the air assets available to a CINC. We worked very hard after Desert Storm to improve our joint doctrine. Jointness means nothing more than teamwork. We have lots of star players within our Armed Forces. The trick is always to put the right stars together on a team to accomplish the team mission without arguing about who gets the game ball.

JFQ *How has the ACOM role as joint force integrator progressed in your view?*

POWELL It took us three years of debate to create the ACOM concept. We recognized that with our drawdowns around the world there would be a greater need to have jointly trained forces immediately available to deploy overseas to be used by theater commanders. Theater commanders trained their forces jointly, but we weren't doing that well enough back in CONUS. Each service trained its own forces, with only large, annual showcase exercises to train a joint force. We had to make joint training the rule and ACOM was created, in my mind, for that purpose. It was a force trainer and provider. In Haiti, it also demonstrated it could run an operation and it did it very well. We had to break a lot of bureaucratic bowls to create ACOM. We knew that it would have to evolve over time and that evolution is still going on.

We used the old Atlantic Command as the base for ACOM because with the end of the need to defend the sea lanes against the Soviet navy, Atlantic Command was a headquarters with the capacity to accept a new mission. Its location in Norfolk placed it near TRADOC, Langley, the Armed Forces Staff College, the Pentagon, Quantico, and other installations that have a role in training, doctrine, contingency planning, and education. At the time, we also left it with mission responsibility for the Caribbean so it would be a real warfighting headquarters and not just a think tank. It also retained NATO responsibilities.

ACOM finally came into being the week I retired. It was my last act going out the door. Others will have to make

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In the field.

the definitive judgment of how well it is doing now.

JFQ *How were a new national military strategy and the Base Force concept developed?*

POWELL During the first year of the Bush administration, it was clear that the Cold War was coming to an end. We were really going to lose our "best enemy." For four decades we had a strategy, force structure, infrastructure, research and development, and investment policy that rested on the need to be ready to fight World War III. If that was going away, then what should we be ready for?

Obviously, we had vital interests in the Persian Gulf and Northeast Asia. We still needed our nuclear deterrent, and we still had force presence responsibilities around the world. And there would still be the need to fight the conflict that no one predicted or planned for. The two most demanding contingencies were the Persian Gulf and Northeast Asia. We considered these major regional contingencies. Since they were no longer linked in the sense that they were part of a worldwide Soviet threat, they could be looked at separately. We needed sufficient forces to fight each of them. It was unlikely they would break out at the same time. But we didn't want our force structure to be so thin that if we were executing one an adversary could take advantage of our weakness and start trouble in the other. The simple sizing formula was to be able to fight two major regional contingencies nearly simultaneously. We wanted the second aggressor to know that we had enough force to deal with him even though it could take a little time to get there.

The Base Force was designed to execute the new strategy. The term "base" was used to denote that we felt it was a floor below which we should not go given the world situation we saw when this was all being designed in 1990. There was quite a bureaucratic battle over what that base should be for each service, and it took some time to get everyone on board.

Both the strategy and the Base Force levels were severely criticized then and now. But they gave us something to plan on and to present to Congress, the American people, our allies, our potential enemies, and our troops as a vision for the future during a time of historic transformation. It served that purpose exceptionally well and gave us the basis to downsize our forces in an orderly way. We were determined not to be pulled apart for want of a rational strategy.

Some critics now say that strategy and force structure have outlived their usefulness. I don't think so. The strategy won't last forty years as did the Cold War strategy of "containment." But until North Korea follows the Soviet Empire into political oblivion and/or the Persian Gulf becomes a region of democracy and stability, we must still be able to respond to two MRCs. The Base Force and its successor, the somewhat smaller Bottom-Up Review force, have also ensured that we had the forces needed to deal with all the contingencies that have come

With the fleet aboard *USS Wisconsin*.
U.S. Navy (Scott Allen)

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along in recent years. Lots of alternative ideas are floating around, but I haven't seen one yet that does the job better.

The roles and missions debate was seen as another way of rationalizing and downsizing the force. I conducted a roles and missions study as required by Congress and pretty much validated the existing roles and missions for our services. Some members of Congress didn't like the results because they weren't revolutionary enough and especially because they didn't point the way to even greater reductions and savings. Congress established a roles and missions commission which after a year's worth of work came basically to the same conclusion I had, although they presented some recommendations for changes in process.

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JFQ *To what extent did Goldwater-Nichols empower the development of this new strategy and the Base Force?*

POWELL It gave me more freedom and flexibility to come up with ideas and move them through the system because I was able to speak in my own right and not wait for a vote of the Joint Chiefs. As it worked out, all the chiefs agreed with the strategy and the overall force structure, although there were some disagreements. In particular, General Al Gray, Marine Corps commandant, argued strongly that the planned strength level for the Marine Corps was set too low, even though the Secretary of the Navy supported that level. Secretary Cheney knew of the disagreement and made a decision. But I was not constrained in providing my recommendation while I tried to achieve total consensus or put it to the "yeas" or "nays." And by the way, Secretary Aspin subsequently raised the planned strength level of the Marines during the Bottom-Up Review.

Much credit for the strategy and force structure we came up with has to go to the Secretary's civilian policy staff. Under Secretary Paul Wolfowitz and his staff did their own analysis as they developed the Defense Guidance. Dick Cheney had a civilian policy check on what I, the chiefs, and the Joint Staff were proposing. We all got along well. It was a healthy relationship which served the Secretary's needs.

We were also able to simplify the joint planning process. We cut through a lot of the paper encrustation which had been the hallmark of the old JCS system.

JFQ *How were you able to recruit talented senior officers to the Joint Staff?*

POWELL Goldwater-Nichols helped enormously. Since joint duty credit was now needed for advancement, we became a sought-after staff. The Joint Staff was seen as a prime assignment. I also believe that it became a more exciting place to work. Panama, the Persian Gulf, new strategy, and the Base Force all served to make the Joint Staff more attractive as a cutting-edge operation. The service chiefs were very forthcoming in nominating their most able officers. We also changed the rotational process for senior staff assignments. It was no longer the "Army's turn" to get the J-3 position, etc. Or worse, to have to fill a position they didn't want to fill! Now the best person gets the job. The law required me to maintain service balance and I was able to do that without a service rotation scheme.

I was also able to get legislation from Congress that gave us billets for the three-star jobs on the Joint Staff. So now, when I asked the chiefs to nominate for one of those jobs, they didn't also have to give up one of their three-star billets. This made the jobs even more attractive and spurred competition.

JFQ *Finally, how well have the new joint officer personnel policies worked?*

POWELL From my perspective as Chairman, they worked very well. More officers than ever before are being trained in team warfare. More officers than ever have team warfare experience. This is good for the Nation and good for the Armed Forces.

I know that the policies have been very difficult for the services to manage, but they have paid off. JFQ

This interview was conducted on June 24, 1996 in Alexandria, Virginia.